Re-imagining Paulo Freire through Rortian Neo-Pragmatism

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Paulo Freire is arguably one of the most well-known educators of our time. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) is a very widely read book by an educator in the last century, and is worthy of holding a special place in the history of educational thought (Roberts, 2000). What makes Freire's work important is that it does not stand still. It offers itself up to different readings, audiences, and contexts (Giroux in McLaren & Leonard, 1993). This is partially because of the ingenuity of the educators who reinterpreted his work to make it better fit the times and the educational settings in which they were interested as well as the rich, complicated texture of his educational philosophy grounded in the experiences of a practitioner theorist with a very keen eye. Acknowledging the value and continuing usefulness of Freire's pedagogy, this paper aims to re-read and re-imagine some of Paulo Freire's work (1970, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2005; Freire & Macedo, 1987) using a Rortian[1] (1979, 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1999, 2007) perspective. The center of the analysis, Freire's claims about a universal human nature, is relatively narrow so as to have a sharper focus for the study. I argue that Richard Rorty, the late neo-pragmatist philosopher who was admired as well as criticized for his views on traditional philosophical questions, provides an effective set of tools to help us return to Freire's conception of a universal human nature. In Rorty's writings, I found only one indirect reference to Freire. When he was asked if religion can play a significant role in changing the society for the better, in pragmatist progress, Rorty responded: "Sometimes it has been useful. 'Liberation theology' was useful in Latin America until the present pope decided to stamp It out." (Rorty & Mendieta, 2006, p. 157). This comment indicates that Rorty was probably aware of Freire's work even though I did not find any references to Rorty in Freire's writings analyzed for this paper.

Methods

For the analysis, I chose texts by Freire that especially focuses on questions of a universal human nature (1970, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2005; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Considering the magnitude of his writing, this choice of books made it impossible to trace the totality of evolutionary changes in his views since I did not analyze all of his books and articles. In a way, the picture I draw will not be complete. Yet, having familiarized myself with most his publications in the English language, it will be an adequate description of his views for the purposes of this paper nonetheless. After deciding on the books to analyze, I bookmarked every instance when Freire used the word "human" or one of its derivatives (e.g. dehumanization) in his writings and then re-read the passages trying to grasp and summarize what he had to say on the issue. I used bookmarking as a technique so as to not miss specific passages that directly referenced the issue. I then reread the passages with the derivatives of the word "human" in the context of the larger text (book) that I was analyzing. Lastly, I returned to Freire's views on a universal human nature with Rorty's help to make the case that his assumptions about the universality of human nature, albeit a good rhetorical tool, are not very central to his perspective on education. They are also somewhat in conflict with the historicity of human beings, which is indeed one of the central tenets of his work.

[1] I would like to thank Dr. Leland L. Glenna, Associate Professor of Rural Sociology and Science at Penn State, for his feedback on this paper.

[2] Feminist popular education is broadly considered a feminist approach to popular education; a form of

A Rortian Approach

Rorty dismisses the central concern of philosophy as "a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so)" (Rorty, 1979, p.3). Following this, it would not be possible to *evaluate* how successful Freire was in representing the true nature of the learning processes for print literacy, or the correct representation of the characteristics of a *real* adult learner using Rorty's approach. This of course does not mean that one could not make judgments on the *usefulness* of a certain theory employing Rorty's framework as a set of tools for inquiry.

From a Rortian point of view, it is a waste of time to try to ascertain whether Freire's description of the world was true to the reality that is out there or not. In fact, Rorty would recommend not entertaining such questions since they cannot be answered in a meaningful manner. In Rorty's ideal form of intellectual life, one would attempt to render the vocabulary of philosophical reflection inherited from the past pointless rather than argue against this past reflection within its own borders using its own language. He emphasized in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (1989), "the trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary" (p. 8). Hence, one may feel the urge to get rid of Freire's vocabulary starting from *banking education* vs *problem posing education* in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* After all, in Rorty's terms, one would not be able to give non-Freiran answers to Freiran questions. However, Freire's writings and ideas continue to be useful in today's context, even though I argue that they would be better off without some of the metaphysical underpinnings. Taking into account the efforts of his followers to make his theories relevant for our time along with his own reinterpretations of his earlier work (Freire, 2004), it is still possible to be inspired by Freire's work to imagine a better world for adult educators and learners, especially for those on the margins of the society.

A Universal Human Nature

There are many elements of Freire's pedagogy that have remained fairly consistent. For the purposes of this paper, his view of people as uncompleted beings, conscious of their incompletion, and their attempt to be more fully human remained in one form or another in his later texts (1970, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2005; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire approached pedagogy with a philosophical rationale about human nature before conceptualizing and implementing educational practices (Dale & Hyslop Margison, 2010). He explains this rationale in only one section of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as opposed to the multiple times he does with some of the other concepts he introduces. Yet, one of the repeating themes of the book is that people are uncompleted beings, conscious of their incompletion, and they should attempt to be more fully human. In many ways, the book reads like a roadmap to be more human. It is no coincidence that he introduces *Pedagogy of Oppressed* (1970) with the following lines:

> "This book will present some aspects of what the writer has termed the pedagogy of the oppressed, a pedagogy which must be forged *with,* not *for,* the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade." (p. 48)

In this book, he describes an individual's ontological and historical vocation as to become more fully human; one of the principal ways to do that is to stop being the oppressor. Freire writes, "It

is not those whose humanity is denied them who negate humankind, but those who denied that humanity (thus negating their own as well)" (1970, p. 55). Humanization and dehumanization are in a dialectical relationship, yet only the first is the people's vocation (p.43). This vocation is constantly negated, yet it is affirmed by that very negation. Dehumanization, which happens to both the oppressor and the oppressed, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human (p. 44). He states that sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so and such a struggle can liberate both parties even though the responsibility to step up to the role of the liberator is on the oppressed. In classic Marxian terms, Freire argues that even though "the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those whom they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle" (p. 47). Therefore, when the oppressed accept the struggle for humanization they also accept, from that moment, their total responsibility for the struggle (p. 68). He posits that freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; it is the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. Furthermore, in his view, people may negate their human nature by acting in certain ways such as being too rigid in evaluating others' views (p.39) and problem-posing education better corresponds to the historical nature of humankind (p. 84). In short, he defends his views on pedagogy by arguing that they better correspond to the true nature of humans which is very problematic from a Rortian perspective as l will discuss in the next section. Freire makes the distinction between animals and humans to describe human beings. In fact, he repeatedly makes this case and reiterates how only humans can shape the environment that they occupy. For example:

> "Animals live out their lives on an atemporal, flat, uniform "prop"; humans exist in a world which they are constantly re-creating and transforming. For animals, "here" is only a habitat with which they enter into contact; for people, "here" signifies not merely a physical space, but also an historical space." (p. 99)

The analysis of *Education for Critical Consciousness* (2005) indicated that Freire's views on human nature are very similar to those in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This can be explained by the fact that the two texts were written one after the other, and presumably it had not been long enough for him to modify his views in any significant way. I will not focus more on this book due to space limitations here.

He touches on the question of the unfinishedness of the human person, and the permanent process of searching in *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998)**.** He also introduces the idea of a universal human ethic, something absolutely indispensable for human living and social intercourse. Freire connects this ethic with humanity's ontological vocation, which calls us out of and beyond ourselves since it is impossible to imagine the human condition disconnected from the ethical condition. He seems to be speaking to those who reduced him to a methodist when he laments that "to transform the experience of educating into a matter of simple technique is to impoverish what is fundamentally human in this experience: namely, its capacity to form the human person" (p. 39). He acknowledges the role of his understanding of human nature in the way he approaches educational problems:

> "Given my understanding of human nature, I have no option but to defend the position I have been defending all along. It's a demand about right thinking that I make on myself

> as I write this text. The demand, that is, that right thinking belongs intimately to right doing." (pps. 41-42)

As in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* he underscores that human presence in the world is something singular and original. He contends that the perception of unfinishedness is essential to human condition. When there is life, there is unfinishedness, but only among humans it is possible to speak of an awareness of this unfinishedness. Human life, takes on a specific qualitative difference in relation to animal life. We see more of the dichotomies, some of which appear to be grounded in Freire's religiosity; human existence is a profound tension between good and evil, dignity and indignity, decency and indecency, and the beauty and the ugliness of the world. He likes being human because he is aware of his unfinishedness, *and* knows that he can go beyond it. He next emphasizes the importance of hope not as a set of tools to create a better world, but as an ontological dimension of our human condition; hope is an essential component, not an intruder. Therefore, the absence of hope is not the "normal" way to be human. For this reason, as human beings, one of our struggles should be to diminish the objective reasons for hopelessness that stops us from acting on our environment. It is important to note here that in this book even the idea of hope, which I argue connects Freire and Rorty, is tied to a particular Frerian understanding of human nature.

Since human condition is one of essential unfinishedness—we are incomplete in our being and in our knowing—it becomes obvious that we are programmed to learn, led by our very incompleteness to seek completeness. The cornerstone of this process is human curiosity. This journey of learning makes us impartial; it is not possible to exist as a human being and be neutral. Freire adds humility as another characteristic of being human. Humility expresses that no one is superior to anyone else. Claims of superiority of one person' over another, of one race over another, of one sex over another, of one class or culture over another, is arrogant and false and a transgression of our human vocation to develop.

Freire describes a clash between human interests and the interests of the market to demonstrate that human nature is not compatible with the rules and goals of the market place. He states that any globalization theory which speaks of ethics hides that its ethics are those of the marketplace and not the universal ethics of the human person. Thus, people should unite against the threat and ferocity of the marketplace. The ethics of the marketplace, with their crass insensitivity to the voice of genuine humanity, are useless in trying to start a rebellion to recreate a more humane world. Instead it is the ethics of universal human aspiration and human solidarity that can be the foundation for such a transformation. Ultimately, Freire posits that he has never abandoned his preoccupation with human nature. On the contrary this concern has been with him since his early experiences in education. He argues that he was occupied with this question and took his radical stance on the defense of the legitimate interests of the human person even before reading Marx, which shaped his ideas of the marketplace.

He starts *Pedagogy of the Heart* (2000) with an argument about the historicity of humans; a world that is plane, horizontal, and timeless can only be compatible with animal life and remains incompatible with human existence. The human body is a conscientious body that can capture, apprehend, and transform the world so it is no longer an empty space to be filled by contents. To reflect, to evaluate, to program, to investigate, and to transform are unique human abilities in the world and with the world. Hope is an ontological requirement for human beings; there is no ontological incompatibility between human beings and the essence of socialism. He reminds his readers that, "the perversity of racism is not inherent to the nature of human beings.

We are not racist; we become racist just as we may stop being that way" (p. 43). Being racist or sexist then is not an integral part of human nature. What is part of human nature is an orientation toward *being more,* which is incompatible with any sort of discrimination. This book is unique in the sense that he acknowledges that what he calls "human nature" can be socially constructed, yet he seems to be insisting on its universality:

> "Theories considering liberation as a given fact of history, or basing it exclusively on scientific knowledge, never excited me very much. The same goes for those that did not accept giving any serious consideration, for example, to human nature, even if human nature was understood to be socially and historically constituted. I mean human nature while taking place in history, rather than prior to history. I cannot think the issue of liberation, and all that it implies, without thinking about human nature." (p. 87)

He makes similar claims in *Literacy Reading the Word & the World* (1987), co-authored with Donaldo Macedo. This book of various speeches and interviews offers a similar message: human beings are social, historical beings, they are doers, they are transformers, they not only know, but they know that they know. We see some modifications in *Pedagogy of Hope* (2004) regarding his views on human nature, at least, in terms of increased emphasis on human nature not being a priori of history. Freire adds "dreaming is not only a necessary political act; it is an integral part of the historical manner of being a person. It is part of human nature, which, within history is in permanent process of becoming." (p. 77).

In his later works Freire puts a heavier emphasis on human nature being embedded in history. However, I argue that it is contradictory to posit a socially and historically constituted human nature and also argue that hoping for, imagining, and acting on a better future is an inextricable part of human nature regardless of time and space. By its very definition, not being a priori of history requires that there would not be anything in human nature that cannot be explained by historicity. In the next section, I will try to deal with this apparent incongruity using Rorty's pragmatic views on discussions of human nature.

Discussion and Conclusions

According to Rorty (1979), "For the pragmatist in morals, the claim that the customs of a given society are "grounded in human nature" is not one which he knows how to argue about. He is a pragmatist because he cannot see what it would be like for a custom to be so grounded" (p. 178). For the purposes of social theory, we can put aside such topics as an ahistorical human nature, the nature of selfhood, the motive of moral behavior, and the meaning of human life (Rorty, 1991, p. 181). In Rorty's pragmatist world everybody has had a chance to suggest ways to cobble together a world society, and all such suggestions about human nature have been thrashed out in free and open encounters (p. 214). Rorty (1991a) believes that a society which took its moral vocabulary from novels rather than from ontotheological or ontico-moral treatises would not ask itself questions about human nature, the point of human existence, or the meaning of human life. Rather, it would occupy itself with what we can do so as to get along with each other, how we can arrange things so as to be comfortable with one another, how institutions can be changed so that everyone's right to be understood has a better chance of being gratified. In fact, this is one of the basic tenets of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989).

As it must have been very clear already, a Rortian reading of Freire's take on a universal human nature and ethic requires us to do away with such fruitless attempts in coming up with a grand theory that will be applicable across time and space. What are we going to do then with all the aspects of Freire's work that we believe would be helpful in creating a better world for the

marginalized? Rorty (1999) sees these attempts at describing human nature as a misleading ways of expressing the hope, which we share, that the human race as a whole should gradually come together in a global community, a community which incorporates most of the thick morality of the European industrialized democracies. It is misleading because it suggests that the aspiration to such a community is somehow built into every member of the biological species. Therefore, *what changes* or *what is* is not some universal biologically determined human nature, but the way we talk about such a construct. We can use the idea of hope rather than the idea of a universal human nature to imagine a better society. In fact, looking more closely some of the issues that Freire attaches to being human, it becomes more apparent that this is indeed very possible; the below argument still is meaningful when we in short say human beings should be hopeful about their future and an independent secure occupation certainly helps:

> "The fulfillment of humankind as human beings lies, then, in the fulfillment of the world. If for a person to be in the world of work is to be totally dependent, insecure, and permanently threatened— if their work does not belong to them—the person cannot be fulfilled. Work that is not free ceases to be a fulfilling pursuit and becomes an effective means of dehumanization" (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p.145).

Freire's engagement with the universal human nature or human ethic is one that can be replaced with the idea of hope which already appears in almost all of his work. In the critical pedagogy developed by Freire, the existing social order is not presented as the inevitable consequence of history or human nature, but rather as an artificial construct to protect powerful ideological interests (Dale & Hyslop Margison, 2010). Yet, Freire uses the idea of human nature and a universal human ethics to argue for a better world. I argue that this does not help the clarity and consistency of Freire's arguments.

In many ways, Freire and Rorty are congruent with each other as historicists in the Hegelian sense. They also share the same belief in the importance of hope in creating a better world. Roberts (2000) posits that Freire's continuing appeal can be partially explained by the deeply hopeful tone in his work. The title of one of Freire's later works, *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994), Roberts says, is a sign of how central hope is to his theory and practice. In fact, he reads Freire's entire educational philosophy as a narrative of hope. However, currently, Freirian hope is an inextricable part of the idea of human nature. All that needs to be done is decouple the two, and further emphasize the role of hope and empathy arising out of crossing borders that divide us. This, at least, I argue what Rorty would have recommended. We would be less likely to be cruel to the people around us thanks to a better understanding of the suffering of other people rather than human nature or a universal human ethics. As Rorty (1998) sees it, one important intellectual advance that has been made in our century is the steady decline in interest in the quarrel between Plato and Nietzsche about what we are really like. There is a growing willingness to neglect the question "What is our nature?" and to substitute it with "What can we make of ourselves?" Freire, in fact, spent his life focusing on the creation of a more just and equitable society. To him, pedagogy was a means to reach such an ideal society where we made something better of ourselves. I argue we should deemphasize his discussion of a universal human nature and ethic since they are distracting and unhelpful in working towards such a society.

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